A Consultation

Paper On

CHANGING DIRECTIONS

Saskatchewan Social Services

Income Security Division

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INTRODUCTION

The Government of Saskatchewan launched two rounds of welfare reform in 1984 and 1987. The stated purpose of these reforms was to encourage assistance clients to become less dependent on the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan.

The welfare reform program of the 1980's has been widely criticized by assistance clients and community groups. Those criticizing the welfare reform program argue the result has been that:

- the system has become harsh and unresponsive to assistance clients;
- that there has been a greater emphasis on control, monitoring, and auditing than on the provision of quality client service;
- that many people in need have had their benefits terminated or denied without proper cause;
- that the social assistance delivery system has undermined clients' sense of dignity and self worth; and
- that benefit levels have become inadequate for people to meet their basic needs.

The critique of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan has been a compelling one. The proposals outlined in this discussion paper are intended to transform the delivery of the Saskatchewan Assistance Plan to ensure that people who are forced to rely upon assistance are treated fairly, and with respect.

The proposed changes are the first step in transforming our social assistance system. We welcome your suggestions for improvement, and will implement changes as quickly as possible.

BENEFITS

The government is committed to tackling the issues of hunger and poverty in Saskatchewan. However, benefit changes are not discussed in this paper because of the fiscal pressures currently confronting the province.

Some points to consider are:

- The Premier has announced that provincial annual deficit is at $1.2 billion and that the province must reduce expenditures and/or raise revenues by $900 million in 1992/93 fiscal year;
- 1991/92 approved social assistance budget is $192 million;
- 1992/93 social assistance expenditure forecast is $217 million, which represents an increase of $25 million due to a caseload increase in excess of 3,600 over the original budget level.

It has been suggested that social assistance benefits be raised to the Statistics Canada low income cut-off levels. To do so would bring social assistance expenditures in 1992/93 to approximately $670 million.

Benefit changes will be made as the province's fiscal situation permits.

PROGRAM ISSUES

Client Communication

While the Department attempts to communicate with clients in a variety of ways, there is often a lack of client understanding about program features, entitlement calculations, rights and responsibilities.

Proposed Changes

- Improve written material for clients to assist them in understanding the program by:
  - making legislation, regulations and the policy manual freely available on request;
  - redesigning the cheque stub to explain benefits in a clear and straight forward manner (see draft proposal on reverse);
  - developing program information kits using "clear language" to ensure ease of understanding and making this information available at application and at other times in reception areas; and
  - working with advocates and other interested parties in drafting of written information for clients.
- Minimize the transfer of clients between workers and promote continuity of service by:
  - using generalized caseloads wherever appropriate; and

- assigning intake workers in Regina and Saskatoon to units that also include workers providing on-going services.

- Ensure clients are given sufficient advance notice of benefit changes in order that they can make alternate arrangements or appeal changes.

- Provide more time for client contact and service by:

  - eliminating cheque pick-up, mandatory reports, joint payee and mid-month cheques for broad categories of clients - these features would be used selectively by workers based on individual client circumstances;
  - using case aids for time consuming routine tasks; and
  - providing knowledgeable reception services capable of providing basic program and case specific information.

Client Verification

A variety of methods are currently used for client verification:

- financial assistance workers verify the accuracy of client circumstances at intake;
- verification workers conduct home visits and third party contacts;
- client circumstances are verified on an on-going basis and at annual review by workers; and
- cases are verified during random audit.

The amount of client verification is considered excessive and some of the methods are overly intrusive.

Proposed Changes

- Ensure that clients understand their responsibility to report correct circumstances (including reasons for reporting) and place more reliance on clients to report as necessary.

- Departmental verification would be entirely a worker's responsibility as part of normal case management.

- Consolidate program audit and verification functions and introduce the use of case aides to assist workers with routine and technical aspects of case maintenance. Workers would re-allocate their time to concentrate on case planning with clients.

- Discontinue any verification procedures that are overly intrusive.

- Retain some capacity to investigate fraud and abuse.

Termination of Benefits for Cause

In order to maintain program accountability, it is sometimes necessary to terminate benefits. Except in cases where the termination is at the request of the client (reporting of changed circumstances), clients have the right to be fully informed of the reason for the termination of their benefits.

Proposed Changes

- Benefits should not be terminated or held without clients being informed and having the opportunity to discuss the reasons for the possible termination.
- Every effort should be made to verbally discuss the concerns of the Department and allow clients an opportunity to present their case and arrive at an alternate case plan.
- If there is failure to resolve the issue and termination of benefits becomes necessary, clients should be notified in writing of the impending termination, the reason for it, the effective date of the termination, and the right to appeal.

Appeal Process

Saskatchewan has three levels of appeal - the Regional Director, Local Appeal Committees and the Social Services Appeal Board.

Proposed Changes

- Ensure that clients are adequately represented through the use of advocates.
- Arrange to develop and provide regular training/orientation sessions by an independent third party with involvement by client advocates.
- Review current rules and procedures to ensure that appeal practices/processes are fair, just and appropriate.
- Review decisions of local appeal committees and the Appeal Board as a means of monitoring for changes in policy or regulations.
- Ensure the appeal process is accessible to clients and their advocates.
- Grant interim assistance pending client appeals.

Qualifying For Assistance

Benefits have been terminated on the grounds that clients have not participated in a training or work program, failed to conduct an adequate job search, or quit or been dismissed from a job for cause.

Proposed Changes

- Continue to require employable clients to conduct adequate and reasonable job searches.
- In cases where clients have withdrawn from a training or work program, or have quit or been dismissed from a job, the worker should discuss the reasons and consequences of the behaviour.

The worker should also outline expectations to be met by the client in order to qualify for benefits.

- Clients should be given written notice of the reasons for refusal and sufficient time to appeal the decision.

Common-law Relationships

The current definition of "spouse" focuses on sharing "emotional and physical love" as well as economic interdependence. It is based on the presumption that, if two people live in the same household, they have a common-law marriage regardless of whether one person has denied financial responsibility for the other. It also places the onus on clients to establish that they are not living as a family.

Proposed Changes

- The burden of proof to establish a common-law relationship should rest with the Department.
- Prior to any change in benefits due to an alleged common-law relationship, the client and alleged spouse should be given the opportunity to discuss their living arrangement with their social worker.
- In cases where two people are living together, but deny a common-law relationship, assistance should be granted as a shared accommodation arrangement.
- Redefine "spouse" to focus on economic interdependence and be gender neutral.

Overpayments

The current definition of overpayment includes assistance received by clients as a result of errors or omissions (administrative errors) by the Department.

Current recovery rates are too high, particularly for those with earnings exemptions.

Benefits are sometimes reduced by overpayment recoveries without the client being given prior notice or explanation.

Proposed Changes

- Where the overpayment is in dispute, suspend recovery until the appeal process is exhausted.
- Give workers discretion to reduce the recovery rate where hardship may result.
- Review the current overpayment recovery rates.
- Provide a written explanation of overpayment assessments to clients prior to commencing recovery.

16 and 17 Year Olds

16 and 17 year olds may receive assistance if their parents are not a resource. Current program expectations and benefits are the same as those for adult clients which are often not appropriate for youths.

Proposed Changes

- The Department should recognize that some youths require additional guidance and support and explore the most effective way of meeting these needs.

Student Financial Assistance

Many university students have financial hardship while attending school. Currently the intent of our program is not to subsidize students' attendance at university. However, there may be compelling situations which justify granting short-term emergency financial assistance to some university students.

Proposed Changes

- Through consultation, develop guidelines to meet exceptional emergency situations and review administration of student assistance with the Department of Education.

Trust Funds

Currently any inheritance, gift or prize in excess of $200/year is assessed as a resource. There is no provision to exempt funds placed "in trust" on a client's behalf, other than funds placed in an inaccessible trust for children.

Proposed Changes

- Provide an exemption for physically and/or mentally handicapped clients.
- Require a statement of purpose for the trust and establish rules of dispersal.